New FSOs Try for Pragmatic Policy

How do recently commissioned foreign service officers feel about the service, and what they hope to accomplish? To get an idea, Washington Post staff writer Marilyn Berger talked with several of them in a meeting arranged on request by the State Department.

Participants were Haley D. Collums, 24, a graduate of the University of Virginia with a master's degree from Princeton, a political officer; George P. Fourier, 29, Williams College, master's from Stanford, a consular officer; Holly Gosewisch, 22, Occidental College, an economic officer; Alan Hegburg, 29, University of Illinois, master's from Johns Hopkins, an economic officer; Ronald B. Rabens, 29, De Paul University, doctorate in law from George Washington University, an administrative officer; Richard J. Stemple, 24, University of Colorado, master's from the University of Southern California, an administrative officer, and Rhoda Weinstein, 24, Lehman College, master's from Purdue University, a communications officer.

The following is an edited transcript of their discussion.

Rabens: I graduated law school in 1971, and it's hard to come out of law school and be turned off by a "system." It was difficult to get into legal aid—funds are short—but I was oriented toward the public sector. I visualized the bureaucracy as staid. The only way I could come into it would be to be sure that my values and goals would not be perverted, changed. I have no great illusion about any active change I will make, that we can change foreign policy, but just being here we will have an effect. If I can influence people about sensitivity and awareness, that is a contribution.

Hegburg: I was working for a congressman and want to go back and work for a congressional committee after getting some experience in the foreign service. I doubt you can work your way to the top (of the service) unless you conform to their model. The tendencies I see among FSOs show a conscious attempt not to get too many people mad at you at one time. They are more submissive, they don't make a major fight.

Gosewisch: It's called "choosing the fight."

Collums: There is an inherent conservatism in a career service and everyone is concerned with maintaining his ideals and values while working in a career system. I came into the foreign service because of my substantive interest in foreign affairs. I could teach, or I could go into the foreign service. I have career expectations; I'd like to be an ambassador some day. If I saw a conflict at some point (between values and career) I would quit.

Question: Don't all young people starting out in careers feel that way?

Collums: Yes.

Fourier: I'm interested in Eastern Europe. I'm not sure I'm going to stay in the foreign service. Everything you do is in a process of growing and developing.

The American public, including students, are not too clear on foreign policy. It's complicated. It's not a world much like the United States and our understanding of the way people think is much less than we thought.

With Kennedy there was that good old missionary sense. People said "let's save the world." It led to radicalism in some cases, because people found out they couldn't change the world as easily as you can change your residence. "People are good, they like to help people." That was the Kennedy thing, idealistic. Now people are wiser.

Gosewisch: You can assume the United States acted either out of malice or stupidity. I think we were stupid but we thought we were doing good. We found out that people don't dig it when you try to make decisions for them and that the best thing to do is leave them alone.

Semple: I don't think you can run foreign affairs from State. You can keep the machine running. But you're not going to have political impact.

Rabens: All of us abroad have political impact.

Fourier: You can change policy in small ways. You apply your own judgment to everything you do. If you have integrity, and you have to have it if you're any good in this job, and if you're ordered to do something, you do it. But there are ways of doing things.

Stemple: The heat's off, the pressure's off. Instead of building a bridge you make your own small, personal contribution, and add one block.

Rabens: We're more aware of the strong points and the limitations of the United States. We see we're motivated for more than altruistic purposes.

Stemple: We're trying to be more pragmatic.